

THEATER MISSILE DEFENSE IN ASIA

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The overarching argument in the paper is that the controversy over the future introduction of US TMD systems in the Asia-Pacific region is much more a function of the political baggage associated with these systems than their actual operational implications; specifically the issue of whether and to whom these systems might be transferred. Clearly this is the case in the context of the potential transfer of TMD to Taiwan and, to a lesser extent, to Japan. As the chief opponent of US TMD Beijing worries less about the ability of the systems to neutralize their missile forces than over their assessment that TMD transfer to Taiwan will inexorably lead to what they fear will result in "military relations creep" between Washington and Taipei. A second major argument is that the original impetus for the decision to develop TMD systems was not a function of developments in Asia. To the contrary, it began with a real and demonstrated threat to US forces by the proliferation and actual use of theater ballistic missiles against US forces in other parts of the world. Iraq's use of SCUD missiles during the Gulf War, and the fact that the single greatest loss of American life during that war was the result of an Iraqi SCUD was a watershed event for the US TMD program. Nevertheless, TMD became "an Asian issue" because Chinese and North Korean missile programs and launches justified the original decisions to move forward with the program after the fact. Finally, it is argued that there will be no debate in the US over whether US forces should receive TMD when developed. No one in the US is going to argue that US forces ~~cannot~~ should not have the protection against TBMs these systems promise. When fully developed TMD will likely be deployed with US forces in the Pacific Command. Future TMD deployment to the Pacific Command will get used as a signal of US "strategic intent" to any country in Asia--specifically China or the DPRK. They no more signal intent at the strategic level than a sophisticated air defense (anti-aircraft) system. At the same time, the decisions surrounding the future sale or transfer of these systems to second parties will have strategic-level political-military implications.

INTRODUCTION

Discussions about the U.S.'s Theater Ballistic Missile Defense programs, commonly referred to as TMD, are always difficult. They are difficult discussions because they revolve about highly complex technical systems the names and terminology of which frequently changes, and they are difficult discussions because they revolve about the complex, often strategic, relationships. Often those who understand the technical complexities of TMD do not focus on the political implications of these systems and those whose concerns revolve about the political aspects of the systems do not fully understand the technical issues associated with TMD. One thing is certain, however. It is hard to think of another example in recent memory of a conventional (non-nuclear related) defensive system that has accrued so much political baggage as has TMD.

What I will do today is to address some basics about TMD as a subject of discourse, some basics about TMD as a system, and some basics about its place in an Asian regional context. Also, some thoughts about China's concerns will be offered. Again, these are my views alone.

TMD AS A PUBLIC ISSUE TMD as a public issue is a shade better than like National Missile Defense. TMD, in any of its variants, does not automatically raise questions about the future of international nuclear arms control regimes. TMD is a theater level system that aims to defend against conventional ballistic missiles, not nuclear weapons. Over the past couple of years the low profile of TMD has changed somewhat, and TMD is in the news more often than before. As a news item it is no longer to be found only in the defense and trade weeklies or the arms control journals. Why the change? Because TMD is now being viewed through--whether or not you've significant Asian security issues. Clearly, TMD has become an issue because of how to deal with North Korea, what TMD may or may not mean as a factor in U.S.-China-Taiwan relations, its impact on the cross-Strait military balance, what TMD means for U.S. allies beyond Asia, and--most recently--lens (and to whom) these systems should (or should not) be sold. And certainly, China, which is the most vocal critic of TMD, has enjoyed some success in making TMD an issue through its vocal opposition to it. I, do not wish to overstate the case. It is true that the general public in the U.S. has read and will read more about TMD; but only in the context of other regional issues. TMD, I predict, will not become a major issue of public debate for the American public for two reasons. First, the degree to which the general public in the U.S. intensely and regularly follows regional security to the point that the ins and outs of TMD is a matter of general knowledge and discourse is likely negligible. And second, as I stated before, no one in the U.S. is going to argue that American forces should not have protection against conventional ballistic missiles if such a defense is feasible.

At the end of the day, the TMD for U.S. forces was not a political issue for the Clinton administration and it will not be a political issue for the new Bush administration. **U.S. TMD DID NOT START OUT AS AN ASIAN ISSUE** One basic point that is often lost in the discussions about TMD in an Asian context is that developments in Asia were not the driving force behind the initial U.S. decisions to move forward with TMD. The genesis of the U.S. TMD program is, in my view, explained by the confluence of two trends that go back more than a decade: one bureaucratic and one operational. The bureaucratic trend was the increasing number of the efforts of the old Strategic Defense Initiative Office (SDIO) created during the Reagan Administration. The operational trend was the concomitant rise in the late 1980s and early 1990s of the development, deployment, and actual employment of theater ballistic missiles around the world. By now, many people have forgotten about the "War of the Cities" between Teheran and Baghdad, the SCUDs fired by Libya in 1986, the Iranian missile problem faced by the U.S. Navy in the Persian Gulf in the late 1980s, or the hundreds of Soviet SCUDs that were deployed in Afghanistan from 1988 to 1991. And clearly, if there was no real operational impetus for developing TMD prior to 1991 there certainly was one as a result of the Gulf War. According to BMDO data, during that conflict Iraq fired some 90 SCUDs against Saudi Arabia and a few against Israel as well. And, very significant from a U.S. perspective, it must be reminded that the single greatest loss of life incurred by U.S. forces during the Gulf War was the result of an Iraqi SCUD attack. It is worth pointing out that the very mixed performance of U.S. Army Patriot batteries against Iraqi SCUDs was due to the simple fact that the Patriot was not designed to be an anti-missile system. The Patriot deployed in the Gulf War was an anti-aircraft system. And it was clear from the Gulf war experience that the U.S. had best do something to deal with the very real threat of ballistic missiles. So, to a certain extent, Patriot and other U.S. TMD systems are not the "Son of Star Wars" as some have in the past derisively labeled it, but more properly, "Son of Sadaam."

Hence, the old SDIO program transformed in the early 1990s into the current Ballistic Missile Defense Organization with a mandate to consider ways to deal with the emergent threat posed by theater ballistic missiles in general and to get some handle on the various TMD programs that were underway within the Services. The point here is that the U.S. TMD program was driven by, and continues to be driven by, the perception--correctly, I believe--that a generic threat to U.S. forces exists in the form of theater ballistic missiles and that these missiles have spread to areas of the world in which the U.S. armed forces often operate or might operate.

The U.S. TMD program has, thus far, been in, is not, or is about any specific country or any particular region of the world. **TODAY TMD IS ALSO ABOUT ASIA** While the impetus behind TMD was not originally driven by Asian security scenarios TMD has today become almost synonymous with Asia within the circles of savants. It may also be worthwhile, then, to review some basics about why or how that happened. Two relatively recent events, I would assert, made Asia a lightning rod for U.S. TMD programs: North Korea's launching of a Taepodong missile in August 1998 and the two instances of Chinese missile firings in the Taiwan Strait in 1995 and 1996.

First, North Korea. Even if one argues after the fact that the DPRK Taepodong launch in August 1998 was merely part of a satellite program, and not part of an offensive missile program, the point remains that the launch demonstrated a capability on the part of an often dangerously unpredictable regime. But most interesting was the fact that the trajectory of the projectile was dangerously close to Japan. The effect was nothing short of galvanizing within the Japanese government and upon Japanese popular opinion. It may not be too much of an overstatement to assert that Pyongyang's launch was the single most important factor in Japan's decision, after a year of internal deliberations, to join the U.S. in TMD research. Second, it was China's missile launches in 1995 and 1996, however, turned the U.S. TMD program into a *cause celebre* within some circles in both Washington and Taipei. Chinese interceptors turned Beijing's Taiwan Strait exercises and their accompanying missile launches in 1995 and 1996 were successful because both Taipei, Washington, and even Tokyo were finally made to understand how serious Beijing is about reunification with Taiwan and that China will brook no backsliding. In retrospect, measured against that criterion, they are correct. All concerned parties re-learned how serious China is about reunification. So Chinese arguments that their use of missiles was successful in that they helped to achieve a political objective is likely correct.

Also in retrospect, however, there is an argument to be made that China paid a dear price for the use of those missiles: the use of missiles by China, especially in 1995, likely enhanced popular support in Taiwan for Lee Teng-hui. The use of missiles certainly unnerved other countries in the region and fueled what the Chinese call the "so-called China threat." The use of missiles by Beijing were likely responsible in part for the U.S.'s dispatch of naval forces to the region and the subsequent deepening of the downturn in U.S.-China relations as a cycle of action and reaction spun about. In the U.S., at least as a general perception among the public due to extensive media coverage, the use of missiles made the letters "P-L-A" synonymous with missiles, and made reporting about Chinese missiles, counting Chinese missiles, and studying Chinese missiles a popular pastime among the media and among the general public in the U.S. Moreover, and clearly worrisome to Beijing, because of the missile launches TMD became an attractive system to many in Taipei. China posed a missile threat and TMD seemed on the surface to some on Taiwan a good potential solution. Equally worrisome from a Chinese perspective, their use of missiles also made TMD attractive to some in Washington, in and out of government, who are concerned about ensuring that U.S. obligations under the terms of the Taiwan Relations Act were met. Finally, the use of missiles by China, as well as the DPRK's missile launch, clearly provided U.S. defense contractors and U.S. Government TMD programmers with dramatic justifications for expensive systems long under development. As a further result, there is a perception that the Chinese missile tests were successful because both Taipei, Washington, and even Tokyo were finally made to understand how serious Beijing is about reunification with Taiwan and that China will brook no backsliding. In retrospect, measured against that criterion, they are correct. All concerned parties re-learned how serious China is about reunification. So Chinese arguments that their use of missiles was successful in that they helped to achieve a political objective is likely correct.

More surprisingly, then, the dynamics that today surround most discourse about TMD in an Asian context is really discussion that revolves around operational issues. And in so doing, any understanding of the systems under discussion often seems, amazingly, to be less relevant than what these systems signify in terms of psychological reassurance, strategic intentions, or political resolve. **THREE COMMON MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT TMD** Back then to some extent in the U.S. TMD in Asia are often political discussions in disguise, there is often a good deal of misunderstanding about these systems and their capabilities. My own understanding of these systems is rudimentary at best, but there are probably three common misunderstandings that are worth pointing out. The most common misunderstanding about TMD is, in my view, also the most important. Specifically, in many discussions about either the virtues or the dangers of these systems, TMD is often portrayed as a "magic system" that in a "stand alone" configuration or in some few multiples can solve one's potential incoming ballistic missile problem.

Even if we assume that the Chinese missile program is a whole host of other countries' missile programs, and we are not yet in a position to know if they will or will not--the general thinking one hears from technical savants is that TMD will be most effective when it is part of a multi-layered air defense system comprising of standard air defense systems as well as various members of the TMD family of systems--even if you will bubble them bubbles of air defense coverage. The point to make here is that the acquisition of a few TMD systems may provide some psychological succor to its owners but they may not necessarily solve one's ballistic missile problem if they themselves. A second point of common misunderstanding is that TMD systems must be "netted" to satellite systems, sensors, and a host of extra-battery systems to work. In other words, hypothetically, if a TMD system were sold to a second party, that second party would be dependant upon U.S.-controlled peripherals such as satellites for target acquisition and cueing. This is untrue of those systems. They are stand-alone defense systems. It is true that such peripherals could enhance the capabilities of upper-tier systems, but my understanding is that this is not a necessary precondition for their employment. Both upper-tier TMD systems, the Army's THAAD (Theater High-Altitude Area Defense) and the Navy's Theater Wide TMD, are apparently capable of operating as self-contained units. Hence, the hypothetical sale of an upper-tier system does not ipso facto require active U.S. involvement for the owners. I do not bring this up to argue for or against such sales per se, but merely to make the point.

A third common misunderstanding is a function of the terminology used to describe TMD. Many mistakenly take the word "Theater" in Theater Missile Defense to mean that TMD will protect (cover) the entire "theater" of a unified command, such as PACOM or CENTCOM. Not so. The word "theater" really means that the system is intended to be used as a stand-alone defense system. It is true that such peripherals could enhance the capabilities of upper-tier systems, but my understanding is that this is not a necessary precondition for their employment. Both upper-tier TMD systems, the Army's THAAD (Theater High-Altitude Area Defense) and the Navy's Theater Wide TMD, are apparently capable of operating as self-contained units. Hence, the hypothetical sale of an upper-tier system does not ipso facto require active U.S. involvement for the owners. I do not bring this up to argue for or against such sales per se, but merely to make the point.

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* This paper represents the personal analysis and opinion of the author only and should not be construed as the views of The CNA Corporation. This is an update to an earlier paper prepared for the Woodrow Wilson Center in October 2000.

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